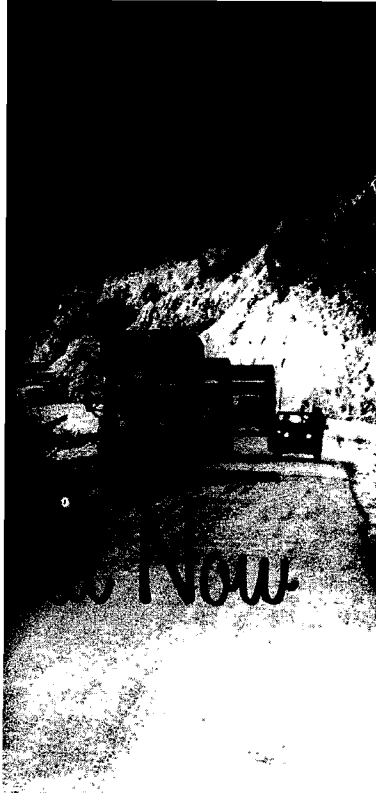


*A wider, hard-surfaced roadway, patrolled by "fortified" vehicles, a 650-yard-wide cleared area to prevent ambushes, and superior potential for combat on the ground are major factors which have changed the Nangyang Pass from a 1954 graveyard of French hopes to a valuable passageway for troops and supplies in 1968*



Jac Weller

**G**ROUPMENT Mobile 100 (GM 100) may have been the finest French unit that fought in Indochina. It was finally destroyed by the Vietminh on 24 June 1954 near Nangyang Pass on Highway 19 between Pleiku and An Khe. This place is second only to Dien Bien Phu as a graveyard of French hope in Vietnam. There are 10,000 men said to be buried there.

I rode and walked recently all over the area escorted by only three US soldiers in an armored jeep. The new Highway 19, now a broad, hard-surfaced road with clearings along both sides, could be seen far below. Convoys of US trucks were moving along it at a rate of more than 500 per day from the port of Qui Nhon all the way to Pleiku. A single US armored cavalry squadron has primary responsibility for keeping the Nangyang Pass section—a total of more than 40 miles—of this highway secure. Why and how has the United States succeeded where the French failed?

The first answer that probably comes to mind is manpower, but that is not correct. The United States actually has fewer men directly involved now than the French had in 1954. GM 100 had more heavy weapons initially than the 2d Squadron, 1st Cavalry, has now, although tanks, armored personnel carriers (APC's), and 105-millimeter, self-propelled howitzers are conspicuous.

Another possible answer is that the enemy is weaker, but this is probably not correct either. Some of the Communist units in the 2d Corps area are identical with those which defeated GM 100, but are now associated with the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) rather than the Vietminh.

A full and correct answer surely includes the superior potential for combat on the ground through use of air mobility, strategic and tactical airpower, and Free World reserves of men and materiel which can be brought into action if an emergency should occur near Nangyang today. The real difference lies in how Highway 19 was held then and is held now.



A US armored jeep near the marker which denotes the ambush area of GM 100

The Vietminh cut this vital road into the Central Highlands repeatedly in 1954. When the Viet Cong did the same early in 1965, a decision was made to introduce US combat troops. Restoring secure ground communications from the coast to Pleiku is a notable US achievement, especially since this is now maintained with a minimum of force.

Early in 1951, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny developed a plan for beating the Communists in Indo-

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china by holding the Hanoi and Haiphong areas in strength and controlling other portions of the country with mobile task forces of infantry, armor, and artillery. GM 100 was one of these and included two French infantry battalions which had fought in Korea. GM 100 also included a battalion of French Colonials, a squadron of armored cavalry, a battalion of 105-millimeter, self-propelled howitzers, and some light units including Montagnards under French officers. Initially, total strength was 3,500 men. The morale, discipline, and combat effectiveness of this unit was second to none, perhaps, in the entire world at the time of its creation on 15 November 1953. It was also well armed, mainly with US weapons.

After a short but intensive training period, it was committed in the Central Highlands around Pleiku. It fought numerous small actions and

took casualties in men and materiel, as well as in physical stamina and health. By mid-March 1954, the strain of Dien Bien Phu began to tell on French strength throughout Indochina. Units were withdrawn from the Central Highlands; GM 100 became the main defender of Highway 19 from Pleiku to An Khe. Other units held several fortified bases both along this vital road and north and south of it, but GM 100 was the cement that held them together in a single structure.

The enemy gradually whittled away at them all. Finally, GM 100 was ordered to abandon An Khe and retreat west along the main road to Pleiku. It began to move at dawn on 24 June 1954, more than a month after the fall of Dien Bien Phu on 7 May 1954. The French held a strongly defended post slightly east of Nangyang Pass known as PK 22, but GM 100 never reached

it. This elite force and some poor units included in its long, narrow column fell into a powerful ambush and were destroyed as an effective military force.

A few vehicles and some individuals did manage to escape to PK 22 early in the ambush. Some squads and platoons went south into the jungle after nightfall and hacked their way around to temporary safety. Most of these shattered remnants eventually arrived at Pleiku along with the defenders of PK 22, but the French lost as conclusively in the highlands as they did in Dien Bien Phu.

When one looks for reasons why the French did not succeed in spite of excellent personnel and materiel, one is forced to consider the word "mobile" in the title of GM 100. Their mobility was good in the area around Pleiku, but Highway 19 was then only one lane wide and bordered by thick



The 1954 road in the foreground compared with new Highway 19 far below

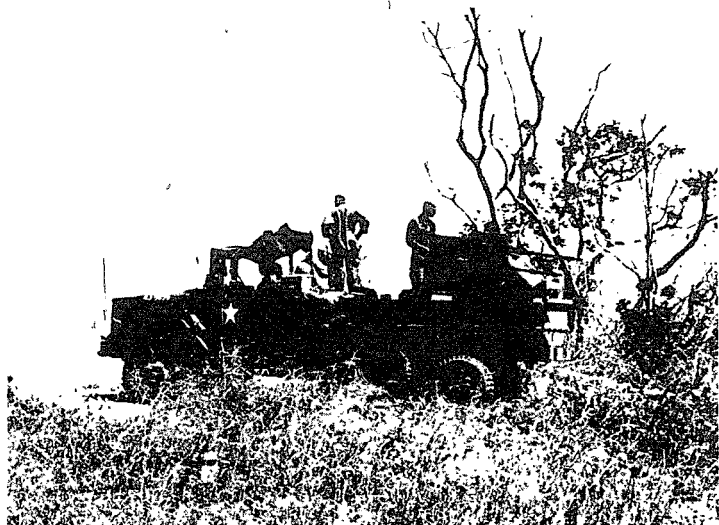
jungle. Tanks, APC's, and self-propelled howitzers could move for long stretches only along this narrow road; even tanks could not leave it.

When the Communists sprang their last ambush, they partially blocked the highway with boulders and placed some of their weapons within 15 feet of the road itself. Mortars were positioned farther back, but with observers looking down on the entire ambush area. The Vietminh commander, rather than the French force commander, had tactical control of his units, in part, by radio. The French possessed the advantage of tactical air support in Indochina to a greater degree than is often realized today, but it did them little good here. The Communists were protected by thick jungle and the proximity of GM 100.

During the action on 24 June 1954,

the French made some minor mistakes. The Vietminh were lucky in killing, wounding, or putting out of action the entire headquarters section of GM 100, including its commander, within 10 minutes. These appear, however, to be of secondary importance. The Communists won essentially because they took advantage of the jungle to mass superior force in a battle area favorable to them. They surprised their enemies in regard to time and place and carried through a well-coordinated ground action in which they used recoilless weapons and mortars in larger numbers and with more ammunition than the French believed possible.

The big change over the past 14 years is in Highway 19 itself. The road is now two lanes wide, solidly constructed, and covered with hard



A truck-mounted "quad 50" defending a working party along the road



A "fortified" truck with *M60* machineguns and riflemen on the hard surface of Highway 19

blacktop. Strips of 325 to 550 yards wide have been cleared along each side of the new highway. The road formerly ran through jungle from An Khe Pass to the east and past Nangyang Pass to the west, but not anymore. American engineers and their equipment have built the new road and removed the jungle. An ambush 325 yards back from a road is not really an ambush at all. The enemy cannot place one closer now without risking disaster. So far, the enemy has been unable to hide a mine underneath the new road and not have its presence detected by the "thunder run" of a tank and two APC's that passes along alertly in the morning before convoys are allowed to start.

Another obvious change is a new type of convoy security. The trucks themselves are nearly defenseless, but tanks and APC's are not ideal—not even good—for protecting them. At least three local modifications of thin-

skinned vehicles now provide convoy protection that is cheap, effective, and has the same characteristics as the trucks themselves. "Homemade", armored vehicles regularly accompany all convoys and do independent patrolling.

Military police jeeps often have one-fourth-inch armor and sandbags on the floor and mount one or two *M60* machineguns behind. These changes have increased total weight between 1,400 and 1,800 pounds. This cuts down life expectancy drastically and practically eliminates cross-country mobility. However, the considerable protection given by this light armor, especially against the Communist 7.62-millimeter bullets, can be of extreme value. A jeep which survives the initial blast of an ambush may be the difference between trifling losses and the annihilation of a small convoy.

Trucks have also been "fortified" with armor and machineguns and accompany larger groups of vehicles.



A bridge-protecting detachment and a wide, cleared area to prevent ambush

They can carry several riflemen and adequate ammunition more comfortably than a tank or APC in the Vietnamese climate. Vehicles of this type cannot move off roads, but they can take punishment and reply with a heavy volume of fire.

Other trucks have been modified by mounting a "quad 50"—four, caliber .50 heavy machineguns which fire together—in back. Since these trucks are not usually heavily armored, they can move off the road and aid tanks and ACP's in protecting working parties who maintain the cleared strip and do other jobs.

These special purpose fighting vehicles do not damage the road and can go anywhere that a loaded truck can move and at the same speed. Even more important, their use allows the true armored units deployed along Highway 19 to remain at full strength and available for other missions.

The French tried to control Highway 19 by means of fortifications along it and the mobile power of GM 100. Essentially, this is what the United States is doing today. There are a few more perimeters since every one of the nine bridges is defended by one. However, the total force is smaller. The real deterrents today are quick reactions in the air by artillery, and especially by armor and mechanized infantry. Many of the tanks and APC's of the 2d Squadron, 1st Cavalry, as well as the self-propelled, 105-millimeter howitzers of the supporting artillery are dug in at these positions. These vehicles, along with some sandbagged trenches and revetments, have a considerable defensive capability, but each one could be destroyed by the enemy in time and for a price.

The key to the security of this vital stretch of Highway 19 lies in the words "time" and "price." The

NVA and Viet Cong know how GM 100 met its fate and would like to win in the same way again. The Viet-minh attacked parts of this elite French force in a dozen minor actions. Sometimes they won, sometimes they lost, but the Communists suffered less in aggregate than the French.

Today, the enemy does not have the time to make a small attack effective because of quick reaction up to any appropriate level. Highway 19 is open because the armored cavalry units presently deployed along it can fight where they are, or move along it, or beside it, in spite of anything the enemy can do.

The enemy could, of course, mount a much larger offensive in this area, something of Khe Sanh size and intensity. They are unlikely, however, to want to do this so far from their logistic support, especially where we

have a secure, two-lane highway leading from deepwater ports to the point of attack. An enemy offensive of this type would precipitate a really big battle in an area favorable to our forces.

So far, all enemy efforts have been small and unsuccessful because they have not solved the problem of our quick reactions. There were some ambushes during the Tet offensive, but Highway 19 was not closed for a single day. Mines were buried beneath the shoulders of the road, not under the paving and blacktop, in places where trucks often stopped. These were exploded by electricity on command from concealed observation posts in the cutover area. However, when the enemy tried to camouflage larger numbers of men and weapons in these side strips, they knocked out a few trucks, but were beaten badly. The



*Photos courtesy of author*

A bunkered-in, 105-millimeter, self-propelled howitzer which can move out as required



convoys which were attacked not only fought back, but summoned help.

More powerful US elements arrived quickly. The Communists could neither hide in the cleared areas nor cope with US firepower. The armed helicopter gunships which patrol Highway 19 from dawn to dark—and sometimes longer—concentrated like vultures and attacked. Artillery fire usually came in quickly since it is registered throughout the Nangyang section. Each time the NVA ambushed, US armor moved out with heavy fire. The key to the US effort is mobile reaction rather than static defense.

Each perimeter is capable of primary defense. Tanks and APC's are dug in to make them more secure, and they are coordinated with other sandbagged structures. If attacked directly, they would be tough. Every fighting vehicle can also move out quickly if an adjacent post needs help. The idea is to be ready to fight efficiently where you are if you are hit, but to move out quickly if your partner up the road is being assaulted. Highway 19 and the cleared strips on either side as they are now constituted give the US armored cavalry the mobility which GM 100 did not have.

The individual posts are too small to be easily hit by rockets, but they are vulnerable to mortar fire. Surprise attacks of this type are difficult to prevent because US installations are along the road in the bottom of the valley. The enemy controls the mountaintops in many areas and can bring in a mortar and ammunition at night. US and Army Republic of Vietnam reconnaissance and other intelligence-

gathering facilities are sometimes successful in spotting these positions beforehand, but not always. With good observation, the enemy can adjust his fire on the target quickly.

In this situation, an armored cavalry reaction does no good. The Communist mortar, mortar crew, and observation post are all far back from the road, but they do not often get off free. The 105-millimeter howitzers fire back quickly. Available helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft are directed to the approximate mortar position. The cost paid by the Communists even for an attack of this small size is best ascertained by the fact that they do not occur often.

As long as the Free World maintains a general, over-all superiority in conventional weapons, along with the ability to move quickly as required day or night, the present rather unusual defense system seems to be sound. A strip of country only 650 yards wide would be difficult to hold in any other way. Overconfidence which leads to disastrous surprise is the chief danger.

Americans have succeeded where the French failed because of greater materiel resources and because of a better plan. Given a reasonable break on intelligence, US forces which react as required to any enemy offensive appear to have the situation well in hand. Highway 19 is an unprofitable objective for an enemy effort of any size at all. We are spread thinner than the French were in this same area, but we have a resiliency and flexibility that they lacked.